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The Science and Psychology of Herd Morality

Herd Morality has been a concept studied in psychology for over a century. The argument of whether it's beneficial for individuals and society or damaging and morally wrong still stands today. This psychological behavior stems from humanity's desire for belonging and social acceptance. From an evolutionary standpoint, mankind survived by staying in groups and relied on collective wisdom and strength. However, in the modern world, this instinct can lead to making decisions that disregard morals, prioritize personal belief, and lack critical thinking. Herd morality shows how social conformity and cognitive biases affect moral behavior, often at the expense of independent ethical reasoning.

Herd Morality is the tendency for individuals to adopt ethical values and behaviors based on the influence of the majority rather than their own personal reasoning. Like Immanuel Kant's "self-imposed immaturity," individuals will often rely on others for decision making and guidance instead of their own understanding and belief. Individuals participate in herd morality largely due to an innate desire for social belonging, validation, and the need for security within a group. Conformity may provide a sense of comfort, as it reduces the uncertainty of confrontational social situations and creates harmony within communities. The fear of judgement, rejection, or being seen as an outsider also further reinforces this tendency.

Herd Morality can be seen in many aspects of life, where people follow societal expectations without critically questioning them, simply because they are widely accepted or are

viewed as safe. Essentially, it prioritizes conformity over individuality, shaping people's sense of right and wrong through social pressure rather than personal reflection. It raises questions about the nature of morality itself and whether it's truly an individual pursuit or it is shaped more by the groups individuals belong to.

Herd Morality and Mob mentality are concepts that often get mixed up, and while both are driven by group influence, one is about social opinions and beliefs and the other is often intense questionable actions. Mob mentality is often driven by heightened emotions, peer pressure, or feelings of injustice. Unlike herd morality, which generally aligns with social and ethical norms, mob mentality is less concerned with morality and can lead to impulsive or irrational decisions and sometimes even violence.

Both are relevant today, but herd morality is a concept individuals may be participating in everyday without even realizing. In 1950 there was an experiment titled "The Asch Experiment" where researchers asked one hundred twenty three participants out of four lines which two were the same length. Eight individuals would be put in a room with one real participant and the others undercover, who were giving an incorrect answer to an obvious question. In the end one third of the real participants would give into social conformity and gave the wrong answer even though they knew the correct one. This shows how common it is for others to make judgements based on others opinions and understandings rather than their own.

Herd morality, like most social norms, has both its advantages and downsides. On the positive side, it's by promotes social cohesion and a sense of community, as shared values help create stability and reduce conflict within groups. It fosters a collective sense of responsibility, encouraging individuals to uphold certain ethical standards that benefit society as a whole. For instance, herd morality often supports efforts to reduce harmful behaviors like discrimination or

violence by reinforcing norms that advocate for equality and respect. However, the downside is that it can stifle individuality and critical thinking. People may adopt moral views simply because they are popular, not because they truly believe in them. The blind conformity can lead to “Groupthink”, where harmful or outdated norms persist simply because they are upheld by the majority. In some cases, herd morality can also be used to justify unjust practices, as seen in history where entire societies adopted harmful moral codes because they were collectively accepted. Ultimately while herd morality can bring people together, it also risks compromising personal autonomy and the development of independent moral judgement.

One of the biggest problems is that it discourages individuals from questioning norms, which are essential for progress and positive change. For example, in societies that rigidly follow traditional beliefs, any deviation from these norms might be met with social disapproval and rejection. This often prevents people from proposing new solutions to issues like inequality, environmental degradation, or social injustice. In this way, herd morality can perpetuate outdated practices, keeping societies stuck in cycles of repetition rather than growing toward inclusion, progression, and creative problem solving. The fear of social exclusion often makes it safer for people to align with what’s familiar to them rather than proposing ideas that could lead to growth but are initially unpopular or uncomfortable. Thus, while herd morality may provide social cohesion, it can also limit the bold thinking necessary for societal advancement.

Herd Morality can easily be seen in the widespread acceptance of slavery in various parts of the world, particularly in the United States before the Civil War. Primarily in the Southern states, slavery was deeply ingrained into the economy, religion, and everyday life. Regardless of the obvious unethical qualities of the practice, it was accepted because it was the societal norm and highly believed in by the majority. Many individuals, even those who may have personally

disagreed with it, adhered to the collective moral code to avoid being ostracized or questioned. Similarly, during the Renaissance, there was a societal pressure to adhere to the religious norms set by the Catholic Church, which suppressed individual scientific inquiry and the questioning of established truths. Figures like Galileo faced harsh punishment for challenging the Church's teaching, even though their discoveries were vital progress. On a more modern note, herd morality can be seen in how social movements like Civil Rights and Women's Suffrage were once opposed by a majority simply because the prevailing moral standards didn't accept these ideas. In these instances, herd morality constrained societal growth until individuals and groups began to challenge and shift the collective values, proving that while herd morality can maintain order, it can also stifle much-needed change.

Herd Morality can also be clearly seen in certain cultural practices where ethically questionable behaviors are accepted and even celebrated simply because they are rooted in tradition. For instance, in parts of India and Saharan Africa, child marriage remains prevalent despite being widely condemned by human rights organizations. It is often justified as a way to preserve family honor or secure economic stability, reflecting the community's collective acceptance rather than individual moral judgment. Similarly, in some middle eastern and south asian communities, honor killings, where a family member is murdered for allegedly bringing shame upon the family, are sometimes seen as justified or necessary within the cultural framework. Female genital mutilation, still practiced in some African and Middle Eastern societies, is often defended to maintain purity, despite its severe physical and psychological repercussions. In these cases, herd morality suppresses important notions and critical thinking, even at the expense of human dignity. These examples show how cultural cohesion can

sometimes override universal moral standards, allowing harmful practices to persist under the banner of tradition

The Dancing Plague of 1518 was an outbreak in Strasbourg, France; where a group of hundreds broke out into hysterical dancing that would last up to weeks, killing dozens who died of exhaustion as the phenomenon greatly spread. Herd morality played a big role as individuals, influenced by the collective behavior and cultural beliefs of the time, such as divine punishment and supernatural possession, participated despite physical exhaustion or the logic behind the situation. Historians are still not positive as to why this strange circumstance started, but some signs point to a poisonous mold growing on the bread of the townspeople that could have resulted in the odd behavior. As time went on however, the pressure to conform and the fear of exclusion or divine wrath likely contributed to the hysterical illness, showing how powerful group influence can be.

Other historical events like the Salem witch trials also heavily showed the consequences of herd morality and what can happen when you disregard logical thinking in order to fit in. “The Crucible,” a play by Arther Miller, follows the story of a town in Salem, where fearing witchcraft and the desire to belong drives people to make accusations against some of their closest friends and neighbors. Characters like Abigail Williams exploit this herd mentality to gain power, while others, like John Proctor, struggle to uphold individual integrity while withstanding overwhelming pressure. The townspeople’s willingness to condemn others that they’ve known for years without evidence show how herd morality can override truth, justice, and rational thinking.

The book “1984” by George Orwell, starkly illustrates herd morality through processes like the Two Minutes Hate, where citizens are collectively provoked to express frantic hatred

towards the party's enemies, particularly Emmanuel Goldstein. This orchestrated ritual not only suppresses individual thought but reinforces a shared moral code defined entirely by the party. Participants do not question why they hate or whether the target is truly an enemy, they simply conform to the collective emotional outburst. Beyond the Two Minutes Hate, herd morality is further shown in the blind acceptance of Party slogans like "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," and "Ignorance is Strength" which are repeated until they become moral truths for the population. Even intimate relationships are governed, as citizens are encouraged to report friends and family who deviate from Party beliefs, reflecting a system where loyalty to the group replaces personal bonds and independent thinking.

Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" subtly explores herd morality through the social dynamics of Victorian society, where reputation, appearances, and conformity often outweigh genuine moral reflection. Dorian himself becomes a symbol of this herd morality, as he is admired and even envied by society despite his increasingly immoral actions. His charm and beauty allow him to maintain a public image that aligns with social expectations, while his sins remain hidden. Society chooses to ignore rumors about him because it is easier to uphold the illusion of respectability than confront uncomfortable truth. Oscar Wilde writes, "society- Civilized society, at least- is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating." This illustrates how moral judgements are often based on social qualities and expectations rather than right or wrong. Characters like Lord Henry also encourage this moral detachment, promoting a philosophy of personal pleasure that further distances Dorian from individual ethical responsibility. In this way, the book critiques a culture where morality is not a personal principle but a performance shaped by the collective values of a superficial and conformist society.

Some other important writings that teach individuals to overcome Herd Morality is “What is Enlightenment?” by Immanuel Kant, “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau, and “Self Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson. “What is Enlightenment?” talks of “Self Imposed Immaturity, which promote and teach the importance of independent thought and the pathway to growth. If individuals are able to have their own ideas, thoughts, and beliefs and stick to them regardless of the majority, then they can improve as an individual and help society grow as a whole.

In his essay “What is Enlightenment?”, Immanuel Kant encourages individuals to overcome herd morality by daring them to use their own reason rather than blindly following the beliefs and rules imposed by society or authority figures. He argues that enlightenment is the process of emerging from self imposed immaturity, a state in which individuals rely on others to think for them. By advocating for intellectual independence and critical thinking, Emmanuel Kant empowers individuals to question societal norms, resist conformity, and make moral decisions based on rational thought rather than fear or group pressure. By embracing Kant’s ideals, individuals can develop personal autonomy, become more ethically grounded, and strive to live as enlightened, responsible members of society.

In “Civil Disobedience, Henry David Thoreau argues that individuals must prioritize their conscience over blind obedience and being machines to the law, government, or majority opinion, offering a powerful critique of herd morality. It’s important to follow individuals and organizations with higher authority, but when beliefs and hunches are dismissed for and because of the government, is when it becomes an issue. Henry David Thoreau insists that just because something is legal or widely accepted does not mean it is morally right and calls on individuals to resist unjust systems, even if it means standing alone. This call to moral independence

encourages people to think for themselves rather than follow the crowd. While individuals act according to their own ethical beliefs rather than yielding to societal pressure, they not only grow personally but also inspire broader social change.

Examples of Civil Disobedience are the Civil rights movement, Women's Suffrage act, and the Boston Tea Party; which were all significant events that helped people who were mistreated and didn't have a voice. When individuals questioned unethical rules and regulations, they were able to improve life for themselves and for individuals in the future who would have had to deal with the same issues. Without their independent thinking and going against the laws of their time, our society would still be stuck in a regressive time. Henry David Thoreau's message promotes a more just and thoughtful society, one where progress comes from individuals who refuse to be swept up in the unthinking will of the majority

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his writing "Self Reliance" promotes the importance of individual thought and integrity as a way to overcome herd morality and foster both personal and societal growth. He urges readers to trust their inner voice, warning that blindly following societal expectations stifles creativity, weakens character, and prevents true progress and improvement. By advocating for nonconformity and self trust, Ralph Waldo Emerson empowers individuals to express their beliefs authentically and value their own thoughts and opinions despite others. The emphasis on personal reliance is to have confidence in one's own ideas and to not invalidate our opinions due to the status of others or what they think.

When things aren't questioned simply because "They've always been that way," it could prevent any improvement within a society. Herd Morality can be a result of many individuals going with the crowd even if it's been morally wrong. Only when people are thinking for

themselves, can problems be fixed and can society grow together. All three writings can be extremely influential to break away from herd morality.

Friedrich Nietzsche explored the psychology of herd morality as a central theme in his critique of modern society and traditional moral values. He argued that herd morality arises when individuals surrender their personal judgement and adopt the values of the majority out of fear, comfort, or a desire to belong. In the writing “on the Genealogy of Morality,” Friedrich Nietzsche explains his beliefs against traditional moral systems, especially those rooted in Christianity, promoting values like humility, obedience, and self-denial, which serve to suppress individual strength and creativity. He believed that these values were not inherently virtuous, but were developed by the “weak” as a way to control the “strong” through guilt and conformity. The psychology behind herd morality, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, stems from resentment and a fear of standing alone. Ultimately he saw herd morality as a threat to human flourishing, innovation, and the pursuit of improvement and greatness.

In conclusion, herd morality reveals the powerful influence of social conformity and cognitive biases on human behavior, often leading individuals to abandon personal ethical judgement in favor of collective norms. From historical events shaped by mass obedience, to cultural practices upheld despite moral controversy, and literary works like 1984 and The Picture of Dorian Gray that critique society’s moral complacency. Yet, through philosophical critiques by thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and modern self-help literature that encourages independent thinking, it becomes clear that overcoming herd morality requires awareness, courage, and a commitment to one's own beliefs. Recognizing the psychological forces behind our moral choices is the first step toward resisting blind conformity and cultivating a more thoughtful, ethical society.

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